1. (Currently Amended) A method for operating a reward program comprising the steps of:

establishing a plurality of product categories;

receiving from a customer an indication of consent to participate in the reward program, at which time a single reward to be provided to said customer at an end of the reward program is undetermined;

receiving an indication of selected ones of the product categories;

tracking, by a computer, a customer's purchases in at least the selected product categories over a plurality of discrete purchase transactions, wherein the tracking step is carried out by a processor of a computer according to software comprising computer-executable instructions on a computer-readable medium; and

providing a said single reward to said customer which varies based at least in part upon the monetary amount of the customer's cumulative purchases in the selected product categories over a discrete period of time, wherein said tracking step takes place over a plurality of transactions in which said reward is accumulated but is not provided to said customer.

2. (Original) The method of claim 1 wherein said receiving step includes receiving an indication of selected ones of the product categories as selected by a customer.

3. (Original) The method of claim 1 wherein said receiving step includes receiving an indication of selected ones of the product categories as selected by an operating store.

4. (Original) The method of claim 1 wherein said selected ones of said product categories are less than all of said plurality of product categories.

5. (Original) The method of claim 1 wherein said reward is based solely upon purchases by said customer in the selected categories.

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6. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1 wherein said tracking step includes tracking purchases of said customer in each of the plurality of product categories over a plurality of discrete purchase transactions.

7. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1 wherein said receiving step occurs before the start of said tracking step.

8. (Original) The method of claim 1 wherein said receiving step occurs after the start of said tracking step.

9. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1 wherein said providing step includes providing a reward only if a customer has made sufficient purchases that exceed a monetary purchase threshold.

10. (Original) The method of claim 9 wherein said reward is determined based upon customer purchases in said selected categories that are made after said purchase threshold is exceeded.

11. (Original) The method of claim 9 wherein said customer is notified after said purchase threshold has been exceeded.

12. (Original) The method of claim 9 further comprising the step of printing, on a customer's purchase receipt, the total amount of the customer's purchases to date that qualify towards meeting the purchase threshold at least until the customer exceeds said purchase threshold.

13. (Original) The method of claim 1 wherein said reward is store credit, a coupon, a gift card, or a gift certificate.

14. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 1 wherein said reward is based at least in part upon a percentage of all or a portion of said customer's purchases only in each of said selected product categories.

15. (Original) The method of claim 1 wherein further comprising the step of recognizing said selected product categories, said recognizing step including entering said selected product categories into a computer system.

16. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 15 wherein said recognizing step includes linking said selected product categories to a permanent customer account maintained beyond a specific transaction.

17. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 15 wherein said recognizing step includes scanning a bar code that is not associated with any goods being purchased or associated with any goods that are available for purchase.

18. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1 wherein each product category in said establishing step includes a plurality of discrete products linked together by a store or chain to thereby define each product category, the method further comprising the step of marking products with indicia to indicate in which product category said marked products are classified.

19. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of printing, on a customer's purchase receipt, the total amount of the customer's cumulative purchases over multiple purchase transaction to date in each of the selected product categories.

20. (Original) The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of receiving an indication of new selected ones of said products categories, and wherein said providing step includes providing a reward to said customer based at least in part upon the customer's purchases in the new selected categories.

21. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1 wherein said tracking step takes place over a selected period of time in which said reward is not provided, and wherein said providing step includes providing a reward that is time limited such that said reward can be used only for a limited period of time after said selected period of time.

22. (Original) The method of claim 1 wherein said program is operated during a time period of relatively high volume of sales, and wherein said reward is limited such that said reward can only be used during a time period of a relatively low volume of sales.

23. (Original) The method of claim 1 wherein said receiving, tracking, and providing steps are carried out for a plurality of customers.

24. (Currently Amended) A method for operating a reward program comprising the steps of:

establishing a plurality of product categories;

setting a purchase threshold based upon the cumulative monetary amount of a customer's purchases;

receiving an indication of selected ones of the product categories as selected by a customer;

tracking, by a computer, said customer's purchases in at least the selected categories over a plurality of discrete purchase transactions during which said reward is not provided to said customer, wherein the tracking step is carried out by a processor of a computer according to software comprising computer-executable instructions on a computer-readable medium;

at some time after the customer reaches the purchase threshold, calculating a reward which varies based at least in part upon customer purchases in the selected categories; and

providing said reward to said customer only if the cumulative monetary amount of a customer's purchases exceed said purchase threshold.

25. (Canceled)

26. (Currently Amended) A system for tracking and calculating customer rewards comprising:

at least one computer programmed to track the monetary amounts of customer purchases in a plurality of predetermined product categories for a plurality of customers over a plurality of discrete purchase transactions, and, after said plurality of discrete purchase transactions, to calculate a single reward for each customer which varies based at least in part upon the customer cumulative discrete purchase transactions in selected ones of said predetermined product categories.

27. (Original) The system of claim 26 wherein said computer is programmed to receive an indication of selected ones of said product categories as selected by a customer.

28. (Original) The system of claim 26 wherein said computer is programmed to receive an indication of selected ones of said product categories as selected by an operating store.

29. (Original) The system of claim 26 wherein said computer is programmed to store a purchase threshold and to compare the cumulative purchases of each customer to the purchase threshold.

30. (Original) The system of claim 26 further including a plurality of checkout terminals located in at least one store and coupled to said at least one computer, wherein each checkout terminal can identify the products purchased by each customer and transfer such information to said at least one computer.

31. (Original) The system of claim 26 further including a bar code scanner operatively coupled to said at least one computer, wherein said bar code scanner can identify the selected ones of said product categories.

32. (Original) The system of claim 26 further including a database of customer information, said database including customer identifying information for each customer and reward information associated with each customer, said database being readable by said computer.

33. (Currently Amended) A software device for operating on a computer and for tracking and calculating customer rewards, the software including:

a tracking module for tracking the monetary amounts of customer purchases in a plurality of predetermined product categories for a plurality of customers for a plurality of discrete transactions; and

a calculating module for calculating, after said plurality of discrete transactions, a single reward for each customer which varies based at least in part upon the cumulative tracked plurality of discrete customer purchases in selected ones of said predetermined product categories.

34. (Original) The software device claim 33 wherein said tracking module can receive an indication of selected ones of said product categories as selected by a customer.

35. (Original) The software device of claim 33 wherein at least one of said tracking module or calculating module can store a purchase threshold and compare the cumulative purchases of each customer to the purchase threshold.

36. (Original) The software device of claim 33 wherein said software device includes a computer readable medium and a computer program stored on the computer readable medium and including said tracking and calculating modules.

37. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1 wherein said receiving step is discrete and separate from a purchase transaction.

38. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1 wherein said reward to said customer is based upon a plurality of discrete transactions.

39. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1 wherein each product category in said establishing step includes a plurality of products linked together by a store or chain to thereby define each product category.

40. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 39 wherein each product category includes a relatively broad category of products and includes a plurality of differing products or goods included therein such that each product category is broader than any particular product or good individually available for purchase.

41. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 1 wherein said establishing step includes establishing, before a purchase transaction, a predefined number of product categories, wherein each product category includes a plurality of different types of products, and wherein the method further includes the step of, after said establishing step and prior to said receiving step, a customer selecting one of said product categories.

42. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1 wherein each discrete transaction constitutes a separate visit to the store or chain.

43. (Canceled)

44. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 24 wherein said tracking step includes tracking a customer's purchases in at least the selected product categories over a plurality of discrete purchase transactions, and wherein said providing step includes providing a single reward to said customer based at least in part upon the customer's cumulative purchases in the selected product categories over a discrete period of time.

45. (Currently Amended) A method for operating a reward program comprising the steps of:

establishing a plurality of product categories;

receiving an indication of at least one selected product category;

tracking, by a computer, a customer's purchases in the at least the selected product category over a plurality of discrete purchase transactions, wherein the tracking step is carried out by a processor of a computer according to software comprising computer-executable instructions on a computer-readable medium; and

after said tracking step, calculating providing a previously undetermined reward to said customer which varies based at least in part upon the customer's cumulative purchases in the at least one selected product category over a discrete period of time; and

providing said reward to said customer.

46. (Canceled)

47. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1 wherein said method is operated by a grocery store, and wherein said product categories are categories of products offered for sale by a grocery store.

48. (Canceled)

49. (Canceled)

50. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1 wherein the reward has a monetary value that is directly based part upon the monetary amount of the customer's purchases in the selected product categories over a discrete period of time.

51. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1 wherein each discrete transaction constitutes a separate visit to the store or chain, and wherein the reward is automatically provided

to the customer at the end of an iteration of the reward program without requiring any further action by the customer.

52. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1 wherein no reward is provided to the customer over said plurality of transactions in which said reward is accumulated and increased, and wherein the reward provides an immediate and tangible financial benefit to said customer.

53. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1 wherein the value of said reward increases as a customer's cumulative purchases in the selected product categories increases.

54. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 45 wherein said tracking step takes place over a plurality of transactions in which said reward is accumulated but is not provided to said customer.

55. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 45 wherein the reward based at least in part upon the monetary amount of the customer's cumulative purchases in the selected product categories over a discrete period of time.

56. (New) The method of claim 1 wherein said tracking step includes tracking the customer's purchases via a barcode scanner at a point-of-sale terminal.

57. (New) The method of claim 1 wherein said receiving step includes receiving said indication on the processor of a computer, according to software comprising computer-executable instructions on a computer-readable medium.

58. (New) The method of claim 1 further comprising, after the establishing step, and before the second receiving step, simultaneously presenting a list of all product categories to said customer, and requesting said customer to select at least one product category for the purposes of said reward program.

59. (New) The method of claim 1 wherein the number of product categories in said establishing step is between two and fifty.

60. (New) The method of claim 1 wherein said single reward is determined after said plurality of discrete transaction by determining a percentage of a customer's purchases in at least the selected product categories over the plurality of discrete purchase transactions.

61. (New) The method of claim 40 wherein said establishing, receiving, tracking and providing steps are carried out for a plurality of customers, and wherein said plurality of product categories are fixed for said plurality of customers such that the same plurality of product categories are offered to each customer in said reward program.

62. (New) The system of claim 26 wherein said at least one computer is programmed by computer-executable instructions stored on a computer-readable medium that, when read by said at least one computer, cause said at least one computer to track the monetary amounts of said customer purchases and to calculate said single reward for each customer.

63. (New) The system of claim 26 wherein said computer is programmed such that said single reward for each customer is undetermined before said plurality of discrete purchase transactions.

64. (New) The system of claim 33 wherein said software device takes the form of computer-executable instructions stored on a computer-readable medium that, when read by a computer, cause the computer to track the monetary amounts of said customer purchases, and to calculate said single reward for each customer.